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Indirectness in English requests among Malay university students

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Abstract

Communication serves as the main medium to connect human beings so that they can live in harmony. There are numerous ways to communicate effectively, and one of them is by making polite requests. Adopting the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), 40 questionnaires were distributed to 40 respondents from two higher learning institutions located in Selangor. The results showed that conventionally indirect strategies were preferred by students when making requests to their lecturers, and even to their friends. Therefore, the findings indicate that the Malay culture conforms to Brown and Levinson's theory on face which highlights that in order to keep either positive or negative face on FTA (Face Threatening Acts), politeness or indirectness strategies are employed.

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1. Introduction

Communication plays a pivotal role in society as it is the main tool that serves to connect, human beings, allowing them to live and work in harmony. Communication has been studied as a means to transmit ideas and thought. However, its most important role is to enable us to form and maintain relationships with others, prevent embarrassment and to sustain interpersonal communication. Therefore, choosing the right words to convey to a person is vital in establishing meaningful and harmonious communications, as well as social relationships. That is why we rarely hear people speak honestly, especially about unpleasant matters. Usually, various strategies must be

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employed by the speaker to avoid conflict and clashes; in other words, being indirect and polite is one of the strategies used to save face and sustain social relationships.

In the academic milieu, where lecturers and students form the banner community, it is not uncommon to hear of lecturers and students becoming friends, as they often share the same interest and thoughts. This is in contrast to three decades ago, when there was a very transparent gap between them, because students were taught to show high respect towards their elders and teachers. At that time, students regarded teachers as their own parents. In the twenty-first century, however, it is normal to see students and instructors walk together: sitting and having coffee at the same table without any discernible barrier between them.

Language functions or speech acts are inseparable from daily life. A variety of speech acts is conducted to achieve communicative goals such as apologies, requests, complaints, and refusals. Making a request is one of the important speech acts conducted in daily life where the goal is to ask someone (hearer) to do something for the benefit of the speaker.

In Malay culture, indirectness is the main concern in communication especially in exchanges between learners and instructors, where it is used to show respect and to save face. However, when it comes to making requests in English, it has less to do with respect and is more to do with achieving goals by asking the hearer to do something for the interlocutor.

Daily communicative activity in academic settings often involves a degree of directness, especially in relation to request making among students. In the case of teacher-student communication, students tend to regard their lecturer as their acquaintance. This raises the issue of what request strategies do students employ with their instructors, and to what extent do students express indirectness in their daily communication with their instructors. As well as investigating the degree of indirectness utilised by students when seeking help from their instructors, this study attempts to determine whether students employ the same request strategies with their peers.

A number of studies involving the request speech act have been conducted and most of them cover intercultural or cross-cultural communication. This study differs from earlier studies in that it focuses on only one culture, i.e. Malay with regard to academic setting. Past studies have shown that level of indirectness varies across cultures as well as social distance. On the other hand, communicative competence and level of English proficiency may serve as the probable factors affecting the strategies used.

1.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to identify how requests are made by Malay university students in academic settings with regard to power and social status. From these answers it will be possible to determine what level of indirectness they utilize in order to express their goal and intended message.

1.2. Research objectives

This study aims to accomplish these two objectives: to analyse the level of indirectness in request strategies in teacher-student communication; and to examine whether students apply the same request strategies with their colleagues as their teachers. Consequently, the two research questions that informed this study are:

- What degree of indirectness is employed in request strategies in teacher-student communication?
- Do students apply the same strategies when making requests to their peers?

1.3. Theoretical perspectives

Speech act theory has to do with language function and language use. Generally speaking, we might say that speech acts are all the acts we might execute through speaking, all the actions we do when we speak. Sometimes people are able to guess and comprehend what the speakers are trying to say even when the speakers are not expressing it straightforwardly. The interpretation can be either correct or wrong or misunderstood. Grice (1975) came up with a cooperative principle (or also known as conversational maxims) that explain how we can interpret the message or interaction correctly:

- The Co-Operative Principle - Make an effort to contribute ideas at the occasion you are engaged with.
- The Maxim of Quality - Do not articulate on what you believe to be wrong and do not verbalise it if you have insufficient information or evidence.
- The Maxim of Quantity - Produce a message that is as informative as required and do not go over the requirement.
- The Maxim of Relevance - Produce an articulation that is relevant.
- The Maxim Of Manner - Be specific, avoid ambiguity, and be brief and orderly.

However, in relation to Grice's principles / conversational maxims, people cannot always follow all the five aspects in order to converse efficiently and also to sustain the rapport. People often prefer not to include information which is not unfavourable to them as the speaker so as to the hearer and it is not so easy to be honest. Therefore, this is what is termed as violation of maxims. The violation occurrence does not mean the speakers are insincere, yet not also to cover the mistake but to maintain the established relationship and to save face (Goffman, 1959) or in other word to self-protect. This violation of Grice's maxim is very much related to being indirect, which is interchangeably termed as politeness (Searle, 1975; & Grice, 1975).

In this section, Goffman's theory of face in human conversation will further explain why people tend to converse indirectly drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory on politeness. Face relates to the individual's self-image and self-esteem. It consists of two facets, namely positive face and negative face. Negative face is when the speaker desires to be free of any actions, whereas positive face is when the speaker wants to be approved of (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.13). In daily communication especially in a social relationship, it is necessary to impede threatening another's face or in other words to save the other's face; therefore we employ indirectness and politeness strategies in our conversations.

The researchers identified three sociological factors that contribute to face threatening acts: the difference in power between speaker and hearer, the social distance between these two parties, and ranking of the obligation in doing face threatening acts (FTA). We have the option to decide whether or not we should implement it when a face threatening act is involved. The terms coined by Brown and Levinson are "on record" – when you decide to do it directly, and "off record" – when you choose to do it indirectly. Positive politeness can be defined as what occurs when the speaker tries to protect the hearer's positive face by decreasing the distance between them. Negative politeness on the other hand, is where the speaker tries to preserve the hearer's negative face by respecting the hearer's personal zone (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pp.68-71).

The relationship between Grice's cooperative principle and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory reveals that face plays a very pivotal role when it comes to expressing our ideas and messages. In order to keep either positive or negative face on FTA (face threatening acts), politeness or indirectness strategies are employed.

1.4. Definition of the terms

Request: A request is regarded as one of the most complicated speech acts compared with other types of language function, such as expressing an apology, greeting, making a promise or agreeing. The reason behind this, according to Lakoff and Searle, is the speaker needs to bear certain aspects in mind, called sincerity conditions as a fundamental central tenet for framing a request. In order to make a sincere request, there are four conditions which need to apply: firstly, the speaker wants the action to be done; secondly, the speaker believes the hearer can perform the actions; thirdly, the speaker believes that the hearer desires to do the action; and fourthly, the speaker believes that the hearer would not perform the action unless asked. The first sincerity condition is called speaker-based and the last three are recognized and termed as hearer-based.

Indirectness and Politeness: Searle (1975) documented indirectness as being when one illocutionary act is performed indirectly via the performance of another. The basis motive of being indirect is to express politeness as well as to save face of the hearer (Goffman, 1959). That is why instead of expressing unpleasant thoughts, many people articulate them courteously. The reason behind this is to avoid conflict, clash and issues especially between parties whose relationship is very close. It is important for everyone to possess this communication skill in order to maintain harmony in the community.

1.5. Delimitations and limitations of the study

This present study covers a very limited area and is only concerned with the request strategies employed by students in an academic setting. Thus, the results will only be generalised on this particular issue without taking into consideration other probable factors such as English proficiency level, socioeconomic status (SES), communicative competence, or pragmatic transfer.

1.6. Significance of the study

This study seeks to bring back teachers to the position that they used to occupy. The results of this study could be useful in making students aware of how important it is to have some respect towards their teachers parallel with Malay culture that regards indirectness as a major concern in performing language function. As for the teachers, this might help them to understand how and why students employ particular request strategies when dealing with them.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech act

Searle (1969) states that all linguistic communication involve the production of speech acts. Speech acts are acts performed by utterances, e.g., giving orders, making promises, complaining, and requesting. Utterances of language are not simply information: they are equivalent to actions (Austin, 1962). In order for second language (L2) learners to successfully achieve speech act performance, Kasper (1984) highlights what is called as “top down processing” manner, where it is necessary for learners to first recognize the extra-linguistic, cultural constraints that operate in a native speaker's choice of a particular speech act appropriate to the context. After recognizing these features, they must be able to realize this speech act at the linguistic level according to the L2 sociocultural norms.

2.1.1 Request

The request is one of the most important speech acts conducted in daily life, where the goal is to ask someone, i.e. the hearer to do something for the benefit of the speaker (Searle, 1969). Ellis (1994) terms requests as directive acts, where a speaker attempts to get the hearer to perform or to stop performing a particular action. Apparently, the hearer is the one who always feels imposed by the speaker's request. Factors such as social distance and power relations between interlocutors greatly influence the strategies used in making requests (Wolfson, 1989).

Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) in their pioneer study on requests have identified three major levels of directness in requests which are; direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect. The first level is considered the most direct, and involves explicit requests such as imperatives. Requests at the conventionally indirect level are “procedures that realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalised in a given language, for instance ‘could you do it’ or ‘would you do it’ meant as requests”. As for requests at the third level (the nonconventional indirect level), this involves an “open-ended group of indirect strategies (hints) that realize the request by either partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act, e.g. ‘Why is the window open’, or by reliance on contextual clues ‘It's cold in here’” (p. 201).

Requests have been one of the most widely studied speech acts compared to apologies and refusals. As stated by Pinto & Raschio (2007), “this wealth of research is largely due to the fact that requests entail the speaker (S) imposing on the hearer (H) by requesting that a certain action be carried out for S's benefit. Given this element of imposition, a successful request requires some degree of linguistic tact that often varies across languages, thus the transfer of strategies from one language to another may result in inappropriate or nonconventional speech” (p. 135).

2.2 Selected studies on request

Several studies have been conducted in the area of the request speech act. One of the studies, by Abdul Majeed A. Umar (2004), involved 20 advanced Arab learners of English. A Discourse Completion Test was employed to elicit data related to the request strategies. The results demonstrated that Arab students of English, even at advanced levels, may fall back on their cultural background when formulating their requests strategies.

A cross-sectional study on request strategies used by Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language and Australian native speakers of English was done by Alireza Jalilifar (2009). The study involved 96 BA and MA Persian students and 10 native speakers of English. Since a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consists of request situations based around relative power and social distance it was considered an appropriate instrument. The results revealed that learners with higher proficiency displayed overuse of the indirect type of requesting; whereas the native group was more balanced in the use of this strategy. As for the lower proficiency learners, they overused the most direct strategy type. This study also reveals that EFL learners exhibit request strategies closer to native speakers in terms of the influence of the social variables. However, in terms of social distance, Iranian EFL learners' performance shows that they are lacking of socio pragmatic knowledge to properly behave in social context.

Mostafa Shahidi Tabar (2012) focuses on the realization of requests by Iranian Persian monolingual and Turkish-Persian bilingual speakers. He employed a Discourse Completion Test and a politeness questionnaire in eliciting the data. The former was used to elicit requests in 10 different situations, while the latter was used to measure the perceived politeness in both bilingual and monolingual speakers. The results revealed that females use less direct strategies in Persian and more direct strategies in Turkish compared to males. The findings also show that both groups were not affected by the speakers' socio-economic status in terms of strategy used.

2.3 Discourse Completion Test

A Discourse Completion Test, or DCT, is a written questionnaire that includes brief descriptions on specific situations followed by a blank space meant to be filled by respondents with suitable answers or responses. It was first introduced by Blum-Kulka in 1982 for the purpose of studying speech act realization strategies of non-native and native Hebrew speakers. The intention of using DCT is to reveal the pattern of a speech act being studied. According to Beebe and Cummings (1996), DCT has been significantly adopted and adapted as a method of data collection in speech acts study since 1982.

Kasper & Dahl (1992) highlight that the DCT combined with role play can function as one of the most important data collection instruments in pragmatic research. Pinto (2007) mentioned that this fact was proven by the number of researchers who used DCT in their cross linguistic studies related to non-native and native production of speech acts such as Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz (1990); Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper (1989a); Blum-Kulka, & Olshtain (1984, 1986); Olshtain, & Weinback (1987) & Trenchs (1995).

Although DCT has been widely used as a major instrument in speech acts studies, it has several disadvantages. One of them is it does not capture naturally the occurring discourse. Lisa M. Nurani (2009) exposed that DCT has specific drawbacks that influenced the instrument's reliability in gathering appropriate data. Nevertheless, Pinto (2007) advocated that eliciting data with a written questionnaire or instrument such as DCT has certain advantages for this type of study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This research employs a survey research design. The researcher believes that this is the most suitable design for the study as it seeks to describe a trend, i.e. the realization of request speech act, and to note the differences and/or similarities (if any) among people.

3.2 Population and sampling

40 undergraduate and post graduate students from two higher learning institutions were randomly chosen. Their age ranged from 18-24 years old. The subjects were from various programmes and courses except English. This was to control extraneous factors, such as the English competency level, that might have affected the production of requests analysed thus affecting the results in this study. Also, subjects whose Grade Point Average (GPA) were 3.5 and above were excluded in this study for the same reason.

3.3 Research instruments

The main tool used to collect data was written Discourse Completion Test (DCT), adapted from Byon (2006), Rose (1992), and Reiter (2000) (see Appendix). The questionnaire used in this study consists of eight scenarios between the interlocutors based on two social variables being investigated: power (P) and social distance (D). Table 1 presents these variables embedded in each scenario. The names of the characters were modified to suit the Malaysian context so that subjects would be more familiar with the scenarios.

Table 1. Social constraints embedded in the scenario.

Situation	Power	Distance
1. Professor	+ P	+ D
2. Stranger	= P	+ D
3. Professor	+ P	- D
4. Junior club member	- P	+ D
5. Lecturer	+ P	- D
6. Close friend	= P	- D
7. Professor	+ P	- D
8. Best friend	= P	- D

3.4 Research procedures

The DCT was first pilot tested with 20 participants from both institutions. There was no ambiguity in the questions asked. Next, it was administered to the subjects of the study with 20 subjects allocated to each researcher. The subjects were approached individually by the researcher and they were briefed in detail about the task. The subjects were asked to fill out the questionnaire within one hour. During the session, the subjects were allowed to ask questions if they were not certain about the scenarios described in the DCT. Considering English might not be their mother tongue, this leniency also helped to build rapport between the researcher and the subjects. Some of the responses had to be discarded since subjects provided reported requests and remarks as answers, such as *'I will explain to the professor that I really need to take the course and beg for him to allow me participate in the course'* in response to situation 1. Thus, these subjects had to be replaced by others in the sample.

3.5 Data analysis

The researcher analysed the data by referring to the coding scheme developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). Three levels of directness for request strategies have been identified which are: direct ('Clean up the kitchen'), conventionally indirect ('Can you clean up the kitchen for me?'), and non-conventionally indirect ('What a mess!').

4. Findings and discussion

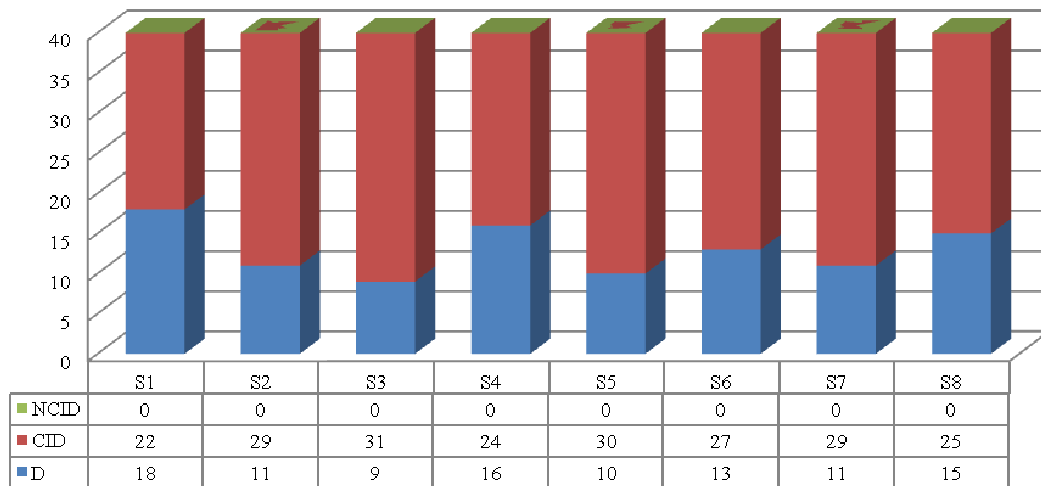


Fig. 1. Request strategies employed by students.

In Situation One (S1), a student asks for permission from a professor to participate in a course. The social variables embedded in this situation are higher power and distance. 22 respondents chose a conventionally indirect strategy when making their request to the professor, while another 18 respondents employed a direct strategy. Although this choice of strategies demonstrated only a slight difference, the conventionally indirect strategy still dominates the graph. From the requests made, it can be seen that the respondents were desperately asking for permission from a not-personally-known professor. These ‘desperate’ requests made for a lack of indirectness, from which the researchers concluded that the ‘urgency’ in Situation One made them forget who they were talking to.

In Situation Two (S2), a student asks another student (a passer-by) for a location of the dormitory. The social relationship between the interlocutors is of equal power and low familiarity. 29 respondents used a conventionally indirect strategy in dealing with the situation and the rest chose to use a direct strategy in their requests. Since the interlocutors were unfamiliar with each other, the preference for the indirect strategy is not questionable.

As for Situation Three (S3), a student asks for permission from a personally well-known professor to observe his class. A significant difference can be seen from the results obtained, where only 9 respondents chose to be direct in their requests while 31 respondents used conventionally indirect strategy in their requests. Such result indicates that even though the professor is personally close to the student, his social status plays a big role in determining the request strategy employed by students. Clearly, a high level of respect is still afforded known teachers by Malay university students.

Situation Four (S4) involves the scenario whereby a senior student (with specific role as vice president of a campus club) asks for another member’s number from a freshman who is also a new member of the club. 24 out of 40 respondents chose to perform the request indirectly, while the rest chose to be direct. These direct requests may be due to respondents awareness of their power base within the club overriding the unfamiliarity that exists between them and the hearer.

In Situation 5 (S5), a student asks one of the lecturers to lend him/her a book in order to finish the assignment. The social variables in the relationship are higher power (+P) and familiarity (-D). Based on the graph shown, out of 40 respondents, 10 respondents relied on direct interaction, whereas another 30 respondents preferred to employ conventional indirectness. This result is similar to S3 where this type of strategy is also highly preferred. In both cases, although they know each other, the hearer is of higher status.

Situation 6 (S6) sees *a student asks his/her close friend to share book since the student forgot to bring his/hers*. 27 respondents chose to be indirect while the other 13 preferred to be direct in their requests. Even though this situation occurs among close friends, the degree of indirectness is still there. This might have to do with the Malay culture itself which places a high emphasis on politeness when making requests. However, the number of direct requests is also relatively high due to the closeness of the relationships.

In Situation 7 (S7), *a student asks his/her professor for an extension regarding the term paper*. The social variables embedded in this situation are higher power and low distance. 11 respondents chose to articulate the request directly and 29 respondents preferred to employ conventional indirectness in order to show respect.

In situation 8 (S8), *an informant asks his/her best friend to lend a substantial amount of money*. The researchers presumed that the most common response would be a casual and direct request. Surprisingly, 25 respondents opted for a conventionally indirect strategy whereby 15 respondents preferred to request directly, which is relatively high.

This study sought to answer two research questions namely, ‘What degree of indirectness is employed in request strategies in teacher-student communication?’ and, ‘Do students apply the same request strategies when making requests to their colleagues?’

The results illustrate that students employ conventionally indirect strategies when dealing with their teachers/lecturers. This can be seen in S1, S3, S5, and S7 where direct strategies are less favoured by the students. Regardless of the degree of familiarity (D) between students and their teachers/professors, the indirect strategy is still highly practiced. The students might feel the necessity to display respect towards their elders; even more so, to mentors who guide, teach and convey knowledge to them. This also suggests why non-conventionally indirect strategies were not employed by any of the respondents in the respective situations.

In situations that involved students conversing with their colleagues/other students (S2, S4, S6, and S8), results showed that the conventionally indirect strategy remains the preferred strategy when performing requests. This surprised the researchers, who initially expected the Malay students to be less indirect in situations involving their colleagues/other students. Another unexpected finding was that none of the respondents employed non-conventionally indirect strategies, such as giving hints when making requests to their colleagues. This might have been due to the design of the DCT not providing situations that could trigger students to employ such a strategy.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the production of requests made by university students in situations that involved their educators and their colleagues. The findings of this study may serve as the platform and base for further study in the future.

Apart from that it brings back teachers’ position to its place so that teachers will be placed as they should be, the results of this study could be useful for students in realizing how important it is to have some respect towards their teachers parallel with Malay culture that regards indirectness as a major concern in performing language function.

The findings were vividly reflected on the theory by Brown and Levinson on face threatening and positive face of the hearer to perform the intended action. Moreover when touching on Malay culture which is rich with politeness and courtesy among its society; they do utilize politeness even with close or best friends. Therefore, based on the analysed results, the researchers found that conventionally indirect strategy is most preferred among students to either lecturers or friends. The reason behind this is because in Malay society they were taught to save face of the hearer and perform request as polite as possible especially to the elder one.

Apart from that, conventionally indirect strategy is employed mostly due to the influence or direct translation from the Malay language which typically starts asking or requesting something with “Boleh tak”. This Malay phrase is directly translated as “Can I” in English, that is why almost 90% of the answers gathered from the questionnaires started with “Can”. This also showed that Malay speakers have overgeneralized the usage of “Boleh” and practice it to any occasion and situation which is sometimes not applicable.

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